DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 387 845 CS 509 049

AUTHOR Danielson, Mary Ann
TITLE The Role of the Course Syllabi in Classroom Socialization.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Indianapolis, IN, April 19-23, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; *Course Descriptions; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; *Socialization; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Strategies; Research Suggestions; Uncertainty Reduction

ABSTRACT

Both educational and organizational researchers have been studying the socialization construct since the late 1970s. Research can be extended to examine the role of the course syllabi as a strategy or tool for classroom socialization. One theory which has been applied to classroom socialization is the uncertainty reduction theory; a possible method for creating meaning within the classroom context is the course syllabus. Initial research results seem to support the conclusion that a well-constructed syllabi can satisfy very real desires of students to know about the course content, classroom rules, and teacher expectations. The syllabi can further contribute to the classroom socialization process by serving as a contract (analogous to the psychological contract operating in organizations) and by reducing classroom uncertainties. For one instructor, her work with students in "Success Prep," an employability training program, demonstrated that allowing students to assist in setting the "normative" culture for the group can and does work. The syllabus can also contribute to socialization by reducing uncertainty or minimizing the amount of surprise that a student experiences. Uncertainty can be reduced by using passive strategies, active strategies, and interactive strategies--each of these strategies can be evident in a course syllabus. Additional research needs to be conducted to better determine the types of information needed on the syllabi and the outcomes (effects) of syllabi on classroom socialization, performance and/or satisfaction. (Contains 27 references.) (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 387 845

The Role of the Course Syllabi in Classroom Socialization

by
Mary Ann Danielson
Creighton University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Central States Communication Association
April 19-23, 1995
Indianapolis, IN

CS509049

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Role of the Course Syllabi in Classroom Socialization

> The process is so ubiquitous and we go through it so often during our total career that it is all too easy to overlook it. Yet it is a process which can make or break a career, and which can make or break organizational systems of manpower planning. (Schein, 1968, p. 2).

The process that Schein (1968) is describing is the socialization process. The socialization process is important in that "the speed and effectiveness of socialization determine employee loyalty, commitment, productivity and turnover. The basic stability and effectiveness of organizations therefore depends upon their ability to socialize new members" (Schein, 1968, p. 2).

Despite the inherent importance of organizational socialization, research in the socialization area didn't really begin in earnest until the late 1970s. Building from the seminal work of Van Maanen and Schein (1979), both organizational and educational scholars began researching the socialization construct. Organizational scholars have developed their research along four key themes: the nature or characteristics of socialization, the stages of socialization, socialization content (which includes both role-related learning and cultural learning), and socialization practices (Louis, 1980). While there is some overlap in the area of socialization stages, the educational scholars, for the most part, have developed their own approaches and models to socialization.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the educational/instructional approach to socialization and attempt to extend the purview of current research by examining the role of the course syllabi as a strategy or tool for classroom socialization. To accomplish this goal, I will begin with a brief review of the teacher socialization literature, narrow the focus to socialization as a process of seeking information to reduce uncertainty, embed the discussion

within the classroom context, and conclude with a description and analysis of the how the course syllabi can be used as an uncertainty reduction/socialization strategy.

Teacher Socialization

Socialization has been defined as "the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge-in short the culture-current in groups to which they are, or seek to become a member" (Merton, Reader, & Kendall, 1957, p. 287). As college/university students become teachers, they experience this socialization process. Unlike primary socialization which occurs from birth, these soon-to-be teachers experience secondary socialization.

Secondary socialization may take two forms: (1) occupational or role socialization, and (2) organizational socialization (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1986). Occupational socialization refers to the "process by which a new member to an occupation becomes acquainted with the culture of the occupational group, including the norms adhering to the role which the new member is to perform" (Corbett, 1980, p. 11). In addition to occupational socialization, once the teacher is hired by a particular school or school district, they must begin to learn the culture of the school (system) in which he or she now teaches.

Educational research surrounding this secondary socialization process is usually characterized by models and stages. The two models used as the general framework for educational research are the functionalist and dialectical models. The functionalist model views communication-as-action (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1987), and research via this venue identifies outcomes of socialization (i.e., attitude shifts and conformity). As Zeichner (1980) observes, most of the studies within the functionalist framework "have emphasized accounts of how the individual adjusts to the constraints of social structure to the neglect of analyses of the

individual's role in resisting and in transforming the social structure" (cited in Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1987, p. 13). According to this view of socialization, teachers are the objects of socialization, the passive receivers of communicative messages and socialization strategies.

The dialectical model of socialization, on the other hand, views communication-as-interaction or transaction (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1987). Under this approach, socialization is viewed as a dynamic process and assumes that individuals are active constructors of their own experiences. Research under this model include socialization strategies, selection of socialization agents, and personal strategies to meet individual needs.

In addition to the two models of socialization, the research is usually linked to a particular stage of socialization. Drawing upon the phases developed by Van Maanen (1976), research usually focuses on the anticipatory socialization stage, the entry or encounter stage, or the adaptation (or as Jablin, 1987, called it the metamorphosis) stage. The anticipatory socialization stage refers to the choice phase during which a person selects a career (role) and decides to become a member of a particular organization. The entry or encounter stage is when the individual confronts the realities of the role/organization, and the adaptation (metamorphosis) stage is the period in which the individual works to individualize their role within the organizational setting.

Consistent with previous streams of teacher socialization research and congruent with my personal views on communication and socialization, I have chosen to subscribe to the assumptions of the dialectical model. In my view, socialization is a process, dynamic and complex. Some researchers (Hess, 1993) have gone so far as to utilize Venn diagrams to depict the dynamic processes of organizational socialization. According to Hess (1993), socialization "involves many processes that overlap chronologically, regress at times, form spirals, and fit into multiple categories" (p. 196). Therefore, at a minimum, we should consider socialization

from a process or dialectical perspective. In particular, we can consider socialization as a process of seeking information to reduce uncertainty.

Socialization as Uncertainty Reduction

Based on the theoretical work of Berger (1987) and Berger and Calabrese (1975), Staton-Spicer and Darling (1987) apply uncertainty reduction theory (URT) to the process of socialization. Specifically, they argue that socialization occurs as a communication process of seeking information to reduce uncertainty about the role or occupation, but also about the organization or culture. Parallel to the importance of uncertainty reduction in the early phases of relationship development, uncertainty reduction is important during the anticipatory and encounter stages of socialization.

Teacher socialization can now be reframed as the communicative process by which individuals attempt to reduce uncertainty about themselves, their roles, and their membership in a particular organization. Teachers, therefore, engage in the socialization process so as to reduce uncertainty or the "surprises" associated with their role and the organization (Louis, 1980). The methods that are utilized may vary, but research (Conforti, 1976; Friebus, 1977; Gehrke, 1981; Newberry, 1978) indicates that new teachers seek and evaluate possible socializing agents (Staton-Spicer & Darling, 1987). Two potential socializing agents include: persons with evaluative power and the ecology of the classroom and school.

Given that teachers spend the majority of their time in the classroom, it is surprising that very little research has been conducted on the role of the classroom's ecology on socializing new teachers. Therefore, the specific context for this study is the classroom. The agents of study include the teacher and the student, with the focus on the relationship. By

moving to a study of the classroom on a relational level, the true dynamics of the classroom and how they contribute to the socialization may be more fully understood.

Classroom as "Culture"

In order for the majority of the socialization literature to apply in the classroom setting, the classroom needs to be considered a form of organization or culture. Given the organizational structure and the hierarchical relationship between instructor and student, it is not hard to envision the classroom as organization. What may be more difficult, however, is envisioning the classroom as culture.

Organizations have come to accept the cultural metaphor as a descriptor for the organization. Louis (1983) describes organizations as "cultural-bearing milieux" which may foster, enhance, hinder, and/or disrupt the development of local cultures. Culture, according to Kroeber and Parsons (1958) is the transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior.

To the extent that organizations may be considered cultures and to the extent that classrooms really are micro-organizations, then classrooms may be considered cultures. Staton (1990), in adopting an ecological perspective on college/university teaching, recognizes the classroom as having a culture. Citing Condon (1986), she identifies the communication norms and patterns that emerge from classroom interactions as constituting the culture of the particular classroom.

Two active agents, teacher and student, are operating within this classroom culture. As socialization occurs in the interactive or transactive process, it is important to remember that students also have active roles. According to Gorham (1990), "there is no such thing as a generic student. Students are active, co-creators of the classroom environment" (p. 220).

Students, together with their teachers, then serve to provide socialization for each other (Galvin, 1990).

Socialization is traditionally achieved via communication. Communication (meanings) can be culturally defined as emergent and intersubjectively created/negotiated (Louis, 1983). In other words, from a dialectical, cultural perspective, teachers and students work together to create/negotiate meanings for themselves (at least at that point in time, within that particular context).

The various communication strategies used to assist in socializing individuals have varied. Organizations have relied on mentoring programs and Realistic Job Previews (Wanous, 1977) to help create or negotiate meaning within and for the organization. The question then becomes: "What tools are available for teachers and students to use to assist in the creation and/or negotiation of meanings within the classroom setting?"

Course Syllabus as Socialization Strategy

One possible method for creating meanings within the classroom context is the course syllabus. Syllabi are "course documents developed by instructors primarily to communicate to students the structure and procedures for courses" (Wulff & Nyquist, 1990, p. 249). Syllabi function to inform students of the scope of the work, to identify the sequence the work will follow, and to describe the tasks by which success will be determined (Saunders, 1978; as cited in Civikly, 1990, p. 60). Due to the nature of their functions, syllabi tend to be distributed the first day of class. As a result, the course syllabi as socialization strategy is grounded in the encounter stage of socialization.

Upon encounter, or the first meeting, the course syllabi enables students to determine "the nature of the class, expectations for participation, written work (including due dates),

class procedures and policies, and a sense of the person who is the teacher" (Civikly, 1990, p. 61). In other words, the syllabi provides socialization content; specifically, role-related (e.g. what they needed to do, expectations about their participation/role in the class) and cultural (e.g. how the class was to be conducted, the learning styles employed, etc.) learnings.

This content, according to Friedrich and Cooper (1990) is especially important. Based upon interviews with a number of students, Friedrich and Cooper (1990) categorized the types of information that students typically sought their first day of class. The three types of information were course coverage, course rules, and teacher personality. These three types of information correspond with the findings of Civikly (1990), and reinforce what many of us may have already known: Students are as interested in the person teaching the course as in the content of the course.

Initial research results, while not directly exploring the role of course syllabi as socialization strategy, seems to support the conclusion that a well-constructed syllabi can satisfy the very real desires of students to know about the course content, classroom rules, and teacher expectations. To the extent that the syllabi can transmit role-related and cultural knowledge, it is contributing to the classroom socialization process.

The syllabi can further contribute to the classroom socialization process by serving as a contract (analogous to the psychological contract operating in organizations) and by reducing classroom uncertainties. The syllabus as contract can serve as the document by which the classroom practices, expectations, and norms are discussed and codified. Any later ambiguities of meanings can be resolved by examining the contract that exists between the parties.

The syllabus as contract should allow for dialogue and negotiation. Students as active agents (co-creators) of the culture should participate in the construction and codification of the practices and expectations. This is not to say, however, that students should ultimately (singly)

determine the course content or standards for the course. Rather, it should be an interactive process by which the instructor works with the students to develop the course (or modify the syllabus) so as to make the course as relevant and meaningful as possible.

My work with students enrolled in Success Prep, an employability training program, demonstrates that allowing students to assist in setting the "normative" culture for the group can and does work. At the beginning of the term, the group determines the rules for the class. While the teacher may introduce ideas, the students are equal partners in the process. Rules for classroom behavior have included: only one person talking at a time, no chewing gum (rule of the facilities we were using), treat others as you would like to be treated, and the teacher is not always right. Equal participation often increases the groups' "ownership" in the class and increases their "investment" in its success.

The course syllabus can also contribute to socialization by reducing uncertainty or minimizing the amount of "surprise" that one experiences, especially the first day of class. According to Friedrich and Cooper (1990), uncertainty can be reduced in one of three ways: passive strategies, active strategies, and interactive strategies. Each of these three strategies can be evident in a course syllabus.

A passive strategy requires that information be gathered through indirect means such as unobtrusive observation. The course syllabus can serve as a passive strategy in that the students can observe the teacher as s/he explains the syllabus. According to Civikly (1990), students develop a positive view of the teacher's investment of time and energy when they see the syllabus the teacher has created. Additional passive sources of information could include attendance policies and office hours (i.e., "open" or "closed" door policy). Each of these items sends a signal to the student about the type of course it will be and the type of teacher you will be.

An active strategy requires the individual to interact with others to gain information. The syllabus, as distributed, gives the students and their coursemates the information they will need to answer each others' questions. Additionally, students can and will learn from observing and following the lead of their coursemates. (See the Social Information Processing Model [Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978] for a fuller discussion of the role of peers in processing [organizational, environmental] information).

Finally, interactive strategies require the student to directly interact with the primary source of information in order to reduce uncertainty. The teacher's style and manner may indicate the degree to which s/he is open to questioning. To the degree to which the teacher is comfortable, s/he should employ immediacy behaviors (e.g., eye contact, establishment of appropriate distances, smiling). Immediacy behaviors should decrease the student's anxiety in approaching the teacher. The greater the communication between the teacher and student, the more active the socialization process.

Theoretically, it appears that course syllabi has a very real role in classroom socialization. Initial results indicate that course syllabi have the ability to transmit role-related and cultural knowledge, initiate dialogue and negotiation, and reduce uncertainty or "surprise."

Further, the course syllabi, as socialization strategy, appears to be underutilized in today's classrooms. While numerous researchers (organizational and educational) have agreed upon the importance of the socialization process, few educational scholars have explored strategies for increasing classroom socialization. Given the amount of time that students and teachers spend together, it is both appropriate and necessary that our research efforts are directed toward classroom socialization, in general, and course syllabus as socialization strategy in particular.

As this is a theoretical paper, additional research needs to be conducted to better determine the types of information needed on the syllabi and the outcomes (effects) of syllabi on classroom socialization, performance, and/or satisfaction. In conclusion, course syllabi as socialization strategy is one area of research where teaching can truly inform research, and research can truly inform teaching.

References

Berger, C. R. (1987). Communicating under uncertainty. In M. E. Roloff & G. R. Miller (Eds.), Interpersonal processes: New directions in communication research (pp. 39-62). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interaction and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. Human Communication Research, 1, 99-112.

Civikly, J. M. (1990). Creating a new course. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp. 53-63). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Condon, J. C. (1986). The ethnocentric classroom. In J. M. Civikly (Ed.), Communicating in college classrooms (pp. 11-20). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Conforti, J. M. (1976). The socialization of teachers: A case study. Theory into Practice, 15, 352-394.

Corbett, H. D. (1980). Using occupational socialization research to explain patterns of influence during student teaching. The Journal of Teacher Education, 31, 11-13.

Friebus, R. J. (1977). Agents of socialization involved in student teaching. The Journal of Educational Research, 70, 207-226.

Friedrich, G. W., & Cooper, P. (1990). The first day. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp. 237-246). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gehrke, N. J. (1981). A grounded theory study of beginning teachers' role personalization through reference group relations. The Journal of Teacher Education, 32, 34-38.

Galvin, K. M. (1990). Classroom roles of the teacher. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp 195-206). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gorham, J. (1990). Individual differences in classroom dynamics. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp. 207-222). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hess, J. A. (1993). Assimilating newcomers into an organization: A cultural perspective. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 21, 189-210.

Jablin, F. (1987). Organizational entry, assimilation and exit. In F. Jablin, L. Putnam, K. Roberts, & L. Porter (Eds.), Handbook of organizational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective (pp. 679-740). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kroeber, A. L., & Parsons, T. (1958). The concepts of culture and of social systems. American Sociological Review, 23, 582-583.

Louis, M. R. (1980). Surprise and sense making: What newcomers experience in entering unfamiliar organizational settings. Administrative Science Quarterly, 25, 226-251.

Louis, M. R. (1983). Organizations as culture-bearing milieux. In L. R. Pondy, P. J. Frost, G. Morgan, & T. C. Dandridge (Eds.), Organizational symbolism (pp. 39-54). Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, Inc.

Merton, R., Reader, G., & Kendall, P. (1957). The student physician. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Newberry, J. M. (1978). The barrier between beginning and experienced teacher. The Journal of Educational Administration, 16, 46-56.

Salancik, G. R., & Pfeffer, J. (1978). A social information processing approach to job attitudes and task design. Administrative Science Quarterly, 22, 427-456.

Schein, E. H. (1968). Organizational socialization and the profession of management. Industrial Management Review, 9, 1-16.

Staton, A. Q. (1990). An ecological perspective on college/university teaching. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp. 39-52). Hilldale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Staton-Spicer, A. Q., & Darling, A. L. (1986). Communication in the socialization of preservice teachers. Communication Education, 35, 215-230.

Staton-Spicer, A. Q., & Darling, A. L. (1987). A communication perspective on teacher socialization. Journal of Thought, 22, 12-19.

Van Maanen, J. (1976). Breaking in: Socialization to work. In R. Dubin (Ed.), Handbook of Work, organization, and society (pp. 67-130). Chicago: Rand McNally.

Van Maanen, J., & Schein, E. H. (1979). Toward a theory of organizational socialization. Research in Organizational Behavior, 1, 209-264.

Wanous, J. P. (1977). Organizational entry: Newcomers moving from outside to inside. Psychological Bulletin, 84, 601-618.

Wulff, D. H., & Nyquist, J. D. (1990). Instructional tools. In J. A. Daly, G. W. Friedrich, & A. L. Vangelisti (Eds.), Teaching communication: Theory, research, and methods (pp. 249-266). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.